



# State of Utah

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## “ORPHAN WELL” PROGRAM AIDS ENVIRONMENT

Of the more than 13,000 oil and gas wells drilled in Utah a mere handful have been left in an abandoned condition without a responsible operator. These orphan wells, as they are commonly called, were drilled prior to current regulations that prevent such abandonment; they occasionally have mechanical problems that threaten to pollute the ground around them, and the operators who were last responsible for the wells can't be found. The Utah Division of Oil, Gas and Mining is currently monitoring 40 such orphan wells.

The Division's Abandoned Well Program has begun work to plug two such abandoned oil and gas wells. An oil well in Duchesne County, a few miles west of Talmadge, has not been in production since 1988. Meanwhile, a natural gas well in Uintah County has been out of production since 1979.

“There are now more safeguards in place to prevent well abandonment, so it's doubtful our orphan list will grow,” explained Petroleum Engineer Dustin Doucet. “We'll also continue to monitor shut-in or temporarily abandoned wells and plug wells as needed.”

Funding for the orphan well program is derived from a two-mil tax levy on oil and gas production in the State that goes into a restricted account known as the Oil and Gas Conservation Account. The account is principally dedicated to the administration of the oil and gas regulatory program (only a portion of the account is set aside for abandoned well plugging) and the account balance is capped at \$750,000. Monies in excess of the account cap transfer to the State General Fund.

“In the case of the oil well in Duchesne County, I'd have to describe that site as an oily mess, so it's fortunate that funding is available to help remedy the situation,” added Doucet. “While many of these abandoned wells have bonds in place, the amount is often not enough to pay all costs, so the orphan well fund steps in and pays the difference.”

The Division of Oil, Gas and Mining has plugged 55 abandoned wells since the program was begun in 1990. More than 7,000 wells remain in active operation throughout the state.

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